DEVELOPING A HEALTHY SELF-IMAGE

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A Paper Presented
to the
Commanding Officer
U.S. Army Chaplain Center and School

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In Fulfillment of the Requirements
of Subcourse 85/0
Chaplain Reserve Component General Staff Course

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February 1981

One of the most significant achievements of modern psychological research has been the understanding of the critical role played by a person's self-image. This understanding has been extremely helpful in explaining the motivation behind much of human behavior and aiding counselors to guide others into healthy patterns of thinking and acting. For this reason, a knowledge of the meaning and influence of the self-image will be an invaluable help to the pastor or chaplain involved in personal counseling.

AN UNFORTUNATE MISUNDERSTANDING

The large volume of material dealing with self-image in recent psychological literature was readily picked up by religious counselors and writers. It quickly became fashionable to find biblical support for the psychological statements about a person's self-image. Unfortunately, in their rush to embrace the discoveries of psychology and harmonize them with the Bible (or vice versa in too many cases), religious writers erroneously equated a good self image with self-love. Primary support for self image teaching was found in scripture passages such as: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 19:19; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:9). It was argued that if a person did not love himself, he could not love his neighbor.

Given the biblical antagonism against selfishness in all its forms, it is not surprising that christian psychologists and theologians began to react to the unfortunate equation of a good self-image with self-love. Paul C. Vitz in his book Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship, writes:

> "It should be obvious - though it has apparently not been so to many - that the relentless and single minded search for and glorification of the self is at cross purposes with the Christian injunction to *lose* the self. Certainly Jesus Christ neither lived nor advocated a life that would qualify by today's standards as 'self-actualized.'

> For the Christian the self is the problem,
> not the potential paradise."[1]

Theologians have noted the same misunderstanding in the use of passages such as Matthew 19:19 or Luke 10:27 to teach that a good self-image is the same as self-love. John Piper writes:

> "The modern misunderstanding of this commandment,
> most prevalent in the cult of the self, is the
> remarkably common notion that Jesus is not pre-
> supposing but commanding self-love and that
> self-love is equivalent to self esteem, positive
> self-regard, and the like."[2]

John Stott deals with the same problem and shows convincingly that the biblical passages that command "love your neighbor as yourself" are not teaching on the subject of self-image at all. He states:

> ". . . theologically speaking, 'self-love,'
> that is, directing one's concern and service
> toward oneself, is the biblical concept not
> of virtue but of sin."[3]

A BETTER UNDERSTANDING

There are other biblical passages which may more properly be used to teach on the subject of self-image from a biblical perspective. One of the best is Romans 12:3 which reads:

> "For through the grace given to me I say to
> every man among you not to think more highly
> of himself than he ought to think; but to
> think so as to have sound judgment, as God
> has allotted to each a measure of faith."
> (NASB)

In this passage the apostle Paul contrasts two different patterns of thought. Both patterns deal with a person's self-concept. The improper self-concept is described as "thinking more highly of himself than he ought to think." The Greek term *huperphroneō* means to be "haughty"[4] or conceited; literally it means to be "high minded." This self-exaltation is clearly contrary to biblical teaching.

At the opposite end of the spectrum would be a pattern of thinking about

oneself which could be described by the Greek term *kataphroneō* which means to "look down on, despise, scorn, treat with contempt."[5] While this term is not actually used in the Romans 12:3 passage, it would be the equally undesirable opposite of thinking too highly of oneself. It would represent self-depreciation as the opposite of self-exaltation. Unfortunately, in christian churches and ministries the idea is all too often suggested that christian humility, a virtue commanded in scripture, is expressed by self-depreciation. If it is true that a great majority of Americans suffer at least mild inferiority, the suggestion that the Bible requires self-depreciating attitudes and actions will add a tremendous burden of guilt to most people who are conscientious about their religion.

What the Bible actually commands in Romans 12:3 is neither of these unhealthy extremes, self-exaltation or self-depreciation. The apostle says that we are to "think so as to have sound judgment" about ourselves. The term *sōphroneō* means "to be of sound mind, be reasonable, sensible, serious, or to be in one's right mind."[6] God evidently desires us to have a healthy, realistic view of ourselves. It is not without meaning that the word *sōphroneō* is related to the word *sōzō* which means "to save." A realistic, balanced view of oneself is a "saving" view in that it allows a person to live a satisfying, meaningful life. Such a realistic view of oneself might accurately be called self-appreciation or self-acceptance.

It is self-acceptance, not self-exaltation or self-depreciation (nor indeed self-love) that is commanded in scripture. Self-acceptance is taught in scripture because an adequate self-concept is necessary to function successfully in life. Any pastor or chaplain who has been involved in counseling has noted that those who struggle with strong feelings of inferiority have a difficult time living a satisfying life. The same may be said for those who are conceited. Both have a very difficult time relating to other people.

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Speaking of the need for an adequate self-concept, Lawrence J. Crabb has said, ". . . people must accept themselves as adequate in a truly significant role if they are to honestly regard themselves as worthwhile and so to enjoy the fulfillment of being a real person."[7] If a counselor is to help another person find that fulfillment of being a real person, he must be able to help him develop a realistic, accurate, and adequate self-image.

WHAT IS OUR SELF-IMAGE?

A person's self-image is his own mental concept or "picture" of himself. It is that collection of thoughts and attitudes which describes how he sees himself and what he believes to be true about himself. The self-image is a collage of images, feelings, and value judgments pertaining to oneself. While the collage will contain many different images, it will have a dominant orientation which will be either positive or negative. A person with a positive self concept will feel good about himself because he judges himself to be acceptable or adequate. A person with a negative self-concept will generally feel bad about himself because he has judged himself to be inadequate or worthless. The feeling associated with the basic orientation of the person's self-image permeates his whole being and affects all of his relationships with other people.

HOW IS OUR SELF-CONCEPT FORMED?

There are three major sources of a person's self image. Heredity is one factor that contributes to a person's self-image. A person's basic personality type will help mold his self-concept. Some people are naturally more outgoing and active. Others are by nature more quiet and shy. Some people struggle with self-acceptance while others seem to have little struggle at all. Some children are naturally more sensitive while others seem to be able to handle everything with little emotional turmoil.

A person's self-concept is also the product of his own evaluation of his experiences. All of us react to our experiences by making value judgments

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about them. When we succeed in accomplishing something we desired to do, we feel good about ourselves. When we do not succeed, we place a negative value judgment on ourselves for failing and feel bad about ourselves. If we usually accomplish what we desire, we tend to have a positive self-image. A number of failures to meet our own goals would tend to produce a negative self-image. It is, however, extremely difficult to talk about value judgments as being strictly individual because our goals and values are so heavily influenced by other people.

By far the most significant source of our self-image comes from what other people think about us as evidenced by their responses to us. More precisely, it comes from what we think they think about us. While heredity is a factor, a person's self-image is primarily a result of interaction with other people. "The sense of selfhood or personhood is not instinctual. It is a social achievement, learned from living with others."[8] A person's self image is formed quite early in his life. By the time a child is five or six years old his basic self-image is established.[9] Because of this, a child's self-image comes primarily from interaction with his parents. Children cannot "see" themselves, so they form mental images and judgments about themselves by seeing themselves reflected in their parents' responses to them. Dorothy Briggs describes this in terms of parental "mirrors."[10] The way parents treat their child tells him whether he is a significant person or not. Parents seem strong and infallible to a child in his pre-school years. Therefore, the child tends to accept as true what the parent says about him through responses to him. A loving, accepting parent who cares about the child will communicate self-worth to the child. The parent that views the child as a nuisance or burden will communicate a low sense of self worth to the child. A busy parent may truly love his child, but, if he does not show that love, the child will not feel loved and accepted. It is the child's feeling of love that is crucial.

Of course, what no child can realize is that his parents have insecurities and problems of their own. These problems affect the parents' relationship with their children. It is unfortunately true that many parents raise their children on the basis of their own needs rather than the child's needs. When this happenns the self-image of the child suffers. Often parents seek to have their own need for significance fulfilled by the performance of their children. This puts a huge burden on their children. For example, the basic pattern of relationship in the early life of an adult alcoholic is of parental expectations that were too high to meet. The child constantly fails to measure up to his parents' unreasonable expectations, so he concludes that he is worthless. Lacking a sense of personal worth and adequacy, he later turns to alcohol or drugs to ease the emotional pain of an inadequate self-concept.

As a child grows up, the self-concept that he derived from interaction with his parents is refined by his interaction with other people. If others respond positively to us we feel positive about ourselves; we have a sense of adequacy and worth. If, on the other hand, people respond unfavorably, our self-concept suffers as a result. This is what gives peer pressure such tremendous power over teenagers in particular. During teen years there is great personal insecurity fostered by the physical and emotional transitions that are taking place. The young person is also beginning to relate more to his peers than to his parents, and his fragile self-image is now at the mercy of his peers for affirmation or rejection. Since all teenagers are going through a similar period of insecurity, they find it very easy to be critical of others in order to build themselves up at the others' expense.

Even later in life a person's self-image is significantly affected by others' responses to him. His relationships with his spouse, professional associates, and church and social acquaintances are very important. Particularly in highly competitive professions such as the military, academic, or large corporations,

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evaluations of one's performance by others greatly influences one's sense of self-worth. A low efficiency report or missed promotion can be devastating to the self-image.

SOCIETY GREATLY INFLUENCES SELF-CONCEPT

In many ways the society itself strongly influences a person's self-image. As society becomes more complex and depersonalized people experience a diminished sense of personal contribution and worth. Assembly line workers who have repetitive jobs with little sense of personal accomplishment find their self-worth challenged. University students in a large, impersonal university feel a lack of personal significance. Changes in society sometimes deprive people of roles which gave them a feeling of fulfillment and personal worth. While there has been much good resulting from the women's liberation movement, the movement's backlash against the wife-mother role has deprived many women of a sense of significance in their roles as wives and mothers.

The society itself is often guilty of giving major significance to the wrong values. James Dobson has effectively summarized the wrong values adopted by contemporary American society. Physical attractiveness is a major source of human worth. After describing the powerful influences of physical attractiveness on children, Dobson states: "Most of the major choices made by adults are influenced one way or another by the attribute of beauty."[11] Those who are physically attractive are given much positive affirmation. Those who do not measure up to society's standards of attractiveness struggle with self-acceptance.

Intelligence is another quality highly valued by our society. Parental expectations of their child's academic performance puts tremendous pressure on many children. The almighty "grade point average" rules the lives of multitudes of college students to whom an "A" represents worth and significance, and a "C" represents failure and inferiority. Other values such as money,

success, and social status have a similarly strong influence on self-concept. For most people it does not matter whether these values are right or wrong. What does matter is that the majority of people hold these values. One therefore can feel worthy and significant only if he conforms to these values.

WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT TO CHANGE ONE'S SELF-IMAGE?

Because one's basic self-image is set at such an early age when we have very little control over our own lives, our major task is to refine or change our self-images. While the self image can be changed, it is never a very easy process. Most personal changes involve some personal insecurity, and a change in one's self-image is no exception. A person with a poor self-image will often hold on to that self-image, as painful as it may be, because the thought of changing to something as yet unknown is even more painful. Our self-image involves our own personal identity; to change that identity is a process fraught with insecurity. Often a person will prefer to retain a known inadequate self-image because he has developed defense mechanisms to cope with the inadequacy he feels. He has no such confidence that he can cope with a different self-concept.

The self-image also resists change because it strongly affects a person's perception of reality. We see ourselves in relation to others and to the world about us in terms of our self-concept. Because of this, our established self concept acts as a grid to screen information that comes to us. If the new input is in harmony with the self-concept, it is allowed to pass through the grid. Those inputs that are contrary to the existing self-image tend to be rejected. All of us have a need to be internally consistent; we must make sense to ourselves.[12] If a person believes that he is basically unattractive, he will reject responses from other people that indicate that they find him attractive. Such a positive response does not agree with his negative judgment regarding his attractiveness. Since he cannot believe himself to be both

attractive and unattractive at the same time, he must reject one or the other evaluation. Since his existing self-image is so powerful, he will usually reject the positive response to maintain his internal consistency. People with poor self-concepts have a difficult time accepting praise as genuine. They tend to discredit the source by thinking that the other person is insincere or deluded.[13]

Since the self-image affects our perception so strongly, it tends to be self-fulfilling. A person may believe himself to be a failure. He then rejects praise when he does do a good job. Thinking himself to be a failure and refusing any contrary information, he begins to expect to fail and to be rejected. Before long he begins to fail, and he experiences actual rejection. Since the rejection is more in harmony with his self-image, he accepts the judgment as a failure and repeats the cycle. It takes a major jolt to break the cycle.

THREE WAYS TO DEVELOP A MORE HEALTHY SELF-IMAGE

Although changing one's self-image is difficult, it can be done. An understanding of how a person's self image is created and how it operates will help in designing a strtegy to change it to be more healthy. The following suggestions are three general ways that the self-image can be effectively changed. A pastoral counselor should adapt them to specific situations encountered in the person he is trying to help.

1 HONESTLY EVALUATE YOURSELF

Because of the selective perception practiced by the self-image, an honest evaluation of oneself may be difficult. A counselor cannot simply tell the counselee that he is worthy or successful or nice looking. The counselee must come to recognize these things himself. A discussion of family background can be quite helpful. The purpose of this discussion is not to shift the responsibility onto parents but to help the person see where some of his self-concept ideas came from. Some of the parental responses and evaluations of the person as a child may have been incorrect. When they were incorporated

into the child's self-concept, they had a detrimental effect. When the person is more mature, he may be helped to understand that some of these parental evaluations came from the parents' own insecurities, problems, and stresses. They therefore do not represent accurate evaluations and can safely be rejected.

In evaluating oneself it is helpful to make a list of both strengths and weaknesses. Sometimes people with poor self-images will have a difficult time listing any strengths and will need some suggestions from the counselor. It is particularly important that weaknesses be put into perspective with strengths so that weaknesses are not magnified beyond their true significance. When there are weaknesses or faults that can be corrected, the appropriate actions should be taken. While some weaknesses cannot be changed, there are many that can be changed at least partially. Excess weight can generally be lost, more flattering styles of dress may be adopted, new skills can be learned through community education classes, conversational range can be broadened by periodically deading news magazines, and almost everyone can participate in some form of physical exercise. The weaknesses that cannot be changed are best acknowledged for what they are without excess significance being allowed to transform them into fatal flaws. Most people seem to want to work and worry about correcting their weaknesses. A much better solution is to concentrate upon the development of strengths. James Dobson calls this "compensation" and says: "compensation is your child's best weapon against inferiority."[14] Compensation works for adults also.

The christian counselor has an advantage at this point. The Bible indicates that all christians have been given spiritual gifts. A spiritual gift is a God given ability for service. The christian counselor can help his counselee to determine his spiritual gift by providing opportunities for meaningful service in the church, chapel, or related ministries. The exercise

of a person's spiritual gift will provide much personal satisfaction as well as a sense of personal contribution and significance. Because all spiritual gifts are necessary for the proper functioning of the church, the exercise of any spiritual gift is a significant contribution to the kingdom of God. For this reason it is not surprising that immediately after Paul's statement about having a realistic, balanced self-image (Romans 12:3 mentioned above), he discusses the different functions of individual christians and the unique contributions of each of the spiritual gifts.

2 ADOPT TRUE VALUES

Part of our culture's detrimental effect on our self-concepts comes through the pressure from false values. Physical attractiveness, intellect, social status, and financial success are some of the false values that create tremendous pressures on our feelings of self-worth. Society too often places its values on those external characteristics which can never provide true satisfaction. There will always be someone more attractive, more intelligent, or more successful. The answer to the pressure of false values is to adopt true values.

Here again the christian counselor who is committed to a biblically based value system has a powerful tool to aid a counselee to develop an adequate self-concept. The values presented in the Bible give clear evidence of the worth of each person. Each human being is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27); each person is greatly loved by God with an unconditional love (Romans 5:8). Each christian is accepted by God (Ephesians1:6), specially gifted for significant christian service (I Corinthians 12:7), and made adequate for that service[15] (II Corinthians 3:6). Furthermore, we are assured that although human evaluations emphasize the outward appearance, God is primarily concerned with the development of character (I Samuel 16:7). Through homework assignments[16] and personal discussions with the counselor

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a person may be helped to develop a new system of values that is both true
and more conducive to the development of a more adequate self-concept.

3 DEVELOP MEANINGFUL PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Because a person's self-image is constructed primarily from interpersonal
relationships (particularly with his parents), his self-image may be modified
through the same process. The importance of developing significant personal
relationships can hardly be over-emphasized. These relationships are
technically termed "facilitating relationships" because they facilitate
"positive self-re-evaluation or increased self-esteem."[17] Every person needs
at least one interpersonal relationship in which he can be totally open and
honest, in which he can reveal his true self. In such a relationship he can
then receive true and direct responses to his self-revelation. This feedback
will greatly facilitate an accurate picture of himself and can help dismantle
some of the wrong ideas previously built into his self-concept.

Such relationships are not easy to develop. Most interpersonal relationships
are designed to protect one's self-concept. Because they fear rejection, people
try to project images of themselves that they believe will be acceptable to
the other person. But, even if these projected images are accepted, there
is no real satisfaction gained because the person knows that it was only
a projected image, rather than his true person, that was accepted. The fear
of rejection makes the development of a truly honest relationship a major
accomplishment.

If an interpersonal relationship is going to develop into a facilitating
relationship it will need to have certain characteristics. It will of
necessity be a relationship in which unconditional love and acceptance are
expressed. The individuals must sense that they are accepted as they are
and will not be rejected as a result of something they might reveal about
themselves. Only then can they feel secure enough to carefully, bit by bit,

reveal their real selves. The relationship must be one of mutual trust in which neither person would deliberately hurt the other in order to satisfy his own ego needs.[18] As they relate to each other honestly, each can give the other direct feedback through honest responses. This feedback, in the context of a secure relationship, provides the means for an accurate re-evaluation and change of one's self concept. Some parts of the person's previous self-concept will be changed or discarded, others will be reinforced or re-valued. The desired end result is a more accurate, balanced, and healthy self-concept.

A counselor will want to help his counselee to develop facilitating relationships. There are two primary places where a christian counselor should be able to help a person develop such a relationship: the family and the church or christian community. In counseling those with self-image problems it will often be crucial to also provide marriage counseling. The couple should be helped to learn to communicate love and acceptance verbally and to give honest responses to each other. Of all human relationships, that between husband and wife should be the kind of facilitating relationship that will help both partners to grow to their fullest potential. Indeed, the biblical injunctions for a husband to love and care for his wife and for her to respect her husband seem designed to produce just such a result (Ephesians 5:21-33).[19]

The christian community itself should also be the source of facilitating relationships. In the passage in Romans 12 where he deals with self-concept, Paul gives several instructions that deal with the quality of interpersonal relationships in the church. Honest communication is called for by "let love be without hypocrisy" (verse 9); a climate of love and acceptance by "be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor" (verse 10); and a depth of personal involvement by "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep" (verse 15). Clearly the

christian community should be a source of mutually supportive interpersonal relationships.

To help develop such relationships, a church or chapel community can provide training in interpersonal relationships and sponsor small groups designed to encourage personal growth through interpersonal relationships. These small groups (variously called share groups, fellowship groups, or growth groups) can provide a secure atmosphere for a person to be honest about himself and receive accurate and helpful feedback about himself. It is helpful to have someone leading the group who is skilled in interpersonal communication. However, the most crucial ingredient is that the group develop a caring and accepting atmosphere. In such an atmosphere even the most timid person will be encouraged to take the first steps of authentic self-disclosure. As the other group members respond in understanding and supportive ways, the person's self-concept will gradually be modified in a more healthy direction.

Problems with self-image are often some of the most difficult personal problems to bring to a solution. Although it strongly resists change, an unhealthy self-concept can be changed. Honest personal evaluation, the adoption of true personal values, and the development of facilitating relationships are the most helpful methods to bring about a needed change. A christian counselor with a caring christian community in which to work has the best possible opportunity to guide hurting people to a more realistic and healthy view of themselves.

1
    Paul C. Vitz, <u>Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship</u> (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), p. 91.

2
    John Piper, "Is Self-Love Biblical?" <u>Christianity Today,</u> (August 12,1977), p. 9.

3
    John R. W. Stott, "Must I Really Love Myself?" <u>Christianity Today,</u> (May 5, 1978), p. 34.

4
    William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, <u>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</u> (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 850.

5
    <u>Ibid</u>., p. 421.

6
    <u>Ibid</u>., p. 809.

7
    Lawrence J. Crabb, Jr., <u>Basic Principles of Biblical Counseling</u> (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), p. 61.

8
    Dorothy Corkille Briggs, <u>Your Child's Self-Esteem</u> (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1970), p.9.

9
    Paul D. Meier, M.D., <u>Christian Child Rearing and Personality Development</u> (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), p. 3. Meier states that "approximately 85% of a person's ultimate personality is formed by the time he is six years old."

10
    Briggs, <u>Self-Esteem</u>, pp. 9ff.

11
    James Dobson, <u>Hide or Seek</u> (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1974), p. 29.

12
    The theory of "cognitive dissonance" is discusses in L. Festinger, <u>A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance</u> (New York: Harper and Row, 1957).

13
    Bobby R. Patton and Kim Giffin, "<u>Guidelines for Improving Interpersonal Communication</u>," <u>Interpersonal Communication</u> (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 445.

14
   Dobson, _Hide or Seek_, p. 74.

15
   Crabb, _Basic Principles_, p. 61.

16
   Helpful discussions of the use of the Bible in Counseling and subject-
related homework assignments may be found in Waylon O. Ward, _The Bible in
Counseling_ (Chicago: Moody Press, 1977).

17
   Patton and Giffin, _Interpersonal Communication_, p. 134.

18
   Ibid., p. 140.

19
   There are several helpful resources to develop communication skills. Two
that have been found useful are: _Communication: Key to Your Marriage_, H. Norman
Wright, Regal Books, 1974, and _The Trauma of Transparency_, J. Grant Howard,
Muntnomah Press, 1979.

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